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The Badger: victim or vermin? Bovine TB and badger baiting

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ABSTRACT

This is the text version of a talk given at the Glasgow Natural History Society's conference, 'Natives, Aliens and Reintroductions: how does ecology inform wildlife conservation in Scotland?' which took place in The University of Glasgow on the 22nd of June 2013. It is a brief assessment of the current attitudes to the badger (*Meles meles*) in England and Scotland and some comments on the statistics that are used to support those attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Bovine TB (*Mycobacterium bovis*) is rarely out of the news just now and presents a real and present danger to the livelihoods of farmers in a number of areas in England and Wales. Badger baiting is a major problem across most of the U.K. with organised groups of individuals regularly targeting and digging badger setts or hunting badgers using dogs. In both cases there are difficulties addressing the problem due to a lack of accurate statistical analysis. In the case of bTB the true situation has been buried by a selective use of statistics for political purposes and with badger baiting the gathering and collation of statistics by official bodies has ceased altogether. In the former case we have too many statistics leading different groups to select only those that suit their argument and in the latter we have a complete lack of accurate statistics meaning that it is very difficult to gauge the size of the problem.

Bovine TB

Bovine TB is a serious problem in large parts of South West England and some areas of Wales. This paper will concentrate principally on the English situation and the government plans for rectifying it.

The incidence of bTB has increased over the last two decades and its geographical range has expanded. It has been recognised for many years that there are reservoirs of infection within wildlife in some areas and that the badger (*Meles meles*) is one of those species. Whilst it is clear that in parts of England and Wales that some badgers suffer from bTB it has never been possible to establish how the infection is spread: from badgers to cattle or vice versa.

The numbers of cattle slaughtered as a consequence of bTB are frequently quoted by those seeking to emphasise the seriousness of the problem. There is no doubt that these numbers are high and that they cause huge problems both financially, emotionally and socially for the farmers involved. Businesses have been ruined and farmers and their families brought to despair by the loss of valuable beasts and sometimes whole herds. It is however, important to place the numbers slaughtered as a consequence of positive bTB tests in the context of annual cattle deaths as a whole.

Scotland is officially regarded as having bTB free status as the annual percentage of infected herds has not exceeded 0.1% for six consecutive years. This status has been achieved and is maintained, by a strict testing regime and movement controls. The following two quotations from a National Farmers' Union spokesman clearly support this. "Within the British Isles, Scotland is in a uniquely privileged position with low disease incidence and no wildlife component impacting on our disease picture." and "...the majority of TB breakdowns within Scotland are linked to animal movements from high risk regions and our best protection from this disease is care in how we source cattle and where possible selecting low risk animals."

This view is also held by the British Veterinary Association, whose then President, Nicky Paull, said in 2009, "The failure of the disease to take hold in Scotland can be linked to the strong legislative stance taken by the Scottish government on pre- and post-movement testing of animals coming into the country."

In 1997 the Krebs Report concluded that there was a lack of evidence about whether badger culling would help control the spread of bTB and proposed a series of trials. As a result the Randomised Badger Culling Trial (RBCT) was set up and ran between 1998 and 2006. This trial took place on thirty areas of approximately 100 square kilometres which historically, had a high incidence of bTB cases in cattle. Each of these ten areas was divided into sets of three, known as 'triplets'. One 'triplet' in each area was designated as 'Proactive', one as 'Reactive' and one as 'Survey'. In the 'Proactive triplets' as

many badgers as possible were eliminated throughout the 'triplet' by repeated culling. The intention was to keep badger numbers low. In the 'Reactive triplets' badgers were culled on and around farms, following a bTB outbreak, but not elsewhere. In the 'Survey triplets' no badgers were culled at all, regardless of bTB outbreaks but the land was surveyed for signs of badger activity to establish presence and give an idea of density.

Overall just under 11,000 badgers were culled during the trial. Numbers dropped to zero for 2001 because the trial was suspended during the foot and mouth outbreak in that year.

The percentage of culled badgers infected with bTB when summed across areas during the trial never exceeded 13%. It should be noted that in spite of claims to the contrary the vast majority of badgers within the area did not have bTB.

Following this extensive trial the panel concluded that "...badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain. Indeed, some policies under consideration are likely to make matters worse rather than better". They added "weaknesses in cattle testing regimes mean that cattle themselves contribute significantly to the persistence and spread of disease in all areas where TB occurs, and in some parts of Britain are likely to be the main source of infection..."

With regard to the way forward, the panel stated, "Scientific findings indicate that the rising incidence of disease can be reversed, and geographical spread contained, by the rigid application of cattle-based control measures alone." They went on to point out, "It is unfortunate that agricultural and veterinary leaders continue to believe, in spite of overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, that the main approach to cattle TB control must involve some form of badger population control." Finally, in a vain attempt to bring scientific rigour to the debate they said, "It is our hope that Defra will embrace new scientific findings, and communicate these to stakeholders in ways that encourage acceptance and participation."

The panel also added a warning, "Our findings confirm that badger culling can prompt the spatial spread of *M. bovis* infection, a phenomenon likely to undermine the utility of this approach as a disease control measure." Sadly, so far this has been ignored.

A frequently stated justification for the current cull is that the cost to taxpayers of bTB outbreaks is huge and increasing but the panel's report states, "...reductions in cattle TB incidence achieved by repeated badger culling were not sustained in the long term after culling ended and did not offset the financial costs of culling." Further research undertaken by Professor John McInerney, University of Exeter concluded "Culling has never turned out to be worth it in strictly economic terms. It is a good deal for the farmers, but a bad deal for the taxpayers, in strict economic terms."

Following the report of the RBCT panel the government considered a number of options:

1) To continue with the current policy with no additional badger control measures;
2) To initiate a government led operation under The Animal Health Act 1981 to cull badgers;
3) To initiate a government led operation under The Animal Health Act 1981 to vaccinate badgers;
4) To issue licences to farmers/landowners under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 to cull badgers.
5) To issue licences to farmers/landowners under The Protection of Badgers Act 1992 to vaccinate badgers;
6) To carry out a combination of options 4 and 5 issuing licences to farmers/landowners to either cull or vaccinate in response to applications.

At present option six is the one being taken forward in limited areas. A report by Godfray et al 2013 pointed out that, "The prospect of badger culling has resulted in bTB policy becoming one of the most contentious areas of policy-making that involves science in the UK." It seems unlikely that this situation will change in the near future.

The latest statistics show that whilst the numbers of cattle being slaughtered are rising the numbers of bTB tests being carried out have also risen. When the number of cattle slaughtered is taken as a percentage of the total number tested, a decrease is clearly noticeable.

A trial programme, culling free running badgers by shooting, is now (September 2013) underway in two areas of England. Unfortunately the trial is only concerned with the efficiency of the culling method and not with the effect of the culling on bTB. Because a raft of testing and movement restrictions have been introduced at the same time, any possible reductions in the number or spread of bTB cases cannot scientifically be attributed to either the culling or the movement controls.

Badger Baiting

Badger persecution has a long history in the British Isles and a number of laws have been passed in an attempt to reduce it.

The traditional method has been to locate a sett and dig into it during the day time when the badgers are most likely to be present. Terrier dogs are specially bred and trained to enter setts and corner badgers. Originally the hunters above would use the dogs

barking to pick the right spot to dig into the sett and remove the badger with a pair of metal tongs. Today technology, in the form of an electronic locator makes picking the right spot more of a science and less of an art. The terrier sent into the tunnel system wears a special collar that sends out a radio signal, which is picked up by his handler using a hand held receiver. The strength of the received signal indicates the spot on which to dig. Generally this activity reaches a peak in March and April when there are most likely to be cubs in the sett. The adult badgers are very loath to abandon cubs to be killed by a terrier and are most likely to put up a very fierce fight in their defence. Dogs that have fought a badger at this time of year are often considered to be the elite of the pack. Sadly they rarely live to enjoy this title for long. The injuries sustained by terriers fighting underground with badgers can be truly horrific and often fatal or life-threatening.

A second method of badger baiting has developed over the last few years and is becoming more popular. This involves hunting badgers above ground using sight-hounds, bull lurchers, specially bred for a combination of speed and strength. The badger is either flushed from the sett during the day or located on feeding grounds during the night, using a high-powered lamp and then hunted down by dogs. Although there are rumours of badgers being taken away alive for organised baiting in cities most of these unfortunate animals are simply torn apart at the scene and the remains are thrown into a hedgerow or stuffed into a sett entrance.

Intelligence that has been gathered indicates that there are a number of organised gangs based around the country who regularly indulge in badger baiting. These groups are known to, and often in regular contact with, one another and with others abroad, especially dog breeders. This contact is facilitated by use of social media on the internet as well as more sophisticated modes of contact. Activities are frequently recorded and stored on electronic retrieval systems and may be passed around fellow baiters or, on occasion, posted on internet sites. There are considerable sums of money available to these gangs that stem from their involvement in other forms of crime and some of their methods are extremely sophisticated. The levels of violence and intimidation against individuals who challenge the behaviour of these gangs as either complainants, investigators or witnesses, can be severe.

All police forces in the UK have Wildlife and Environmental Crime Officers who are specially trained in this complex area of work and in addition have the support of external experts and the animal welfare charities. Intelligence collection, collation and analysis are carried out by the National Wildlife Crime Unit which is based in Livingstone in Scotland. Until the start of 2012 the unit maintained a central record of wildlife crimes reported to both the police and the non-statutory agencies. This role has now been discontinued, apparently due to financial constraints, which means that there is no longer any organisation that maintains the statistical database necessary to give an overarching view of wildlife crime in the UK. The third report of the 2012-13 session of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee said, "The NWCU should be directed and funded to develop a wildlife crime database to encompass all available information on incidents reported to the police and on prosecutions in the courts in the UK." This recommendation from parliament has been rejected by the government, throwing the burden of collecting and collating statistics on to charities. In the case of crimes against badgers in the UK, the only statistics available are those gathered by the UK Crime Prevention Lead, who is the Species Protection Officer for the charity Scottish Badgers. As the police are under no obligation to respond to requests for information, and that information is 'sanitised' in any case, this makes his work incredibly difficult. Badger persecution is a UK wildlife crime priority and it seems bizarre that, having recognised this, the government makes no attempt to gather the statistics necessary to establish the size of the problem and the effectiveness, or otherwise, of the various enforcement measures.

CONCLUSION

In the cases outlined above the badger has been categorised as either a verminous carrier of disease or a victim of sadistic cruelty. Deciding which of these two views is correct, or if the truth lies somewhere in-between, is a task that can only be helped by the collection and dissemination of high quality statistics.

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